

## EXPIRATION DATE

Kate says mirrors never lie. I say she ought to return, or better yet, toss that fluorescent devil lamp she bought online into the nearest trash bin.

"I'm telling you, Sean, I need some work done!" She's using her perfectly manicured nails to pull, stretch, and massage her skin. Around the eyes, cheekbones, chin, neck. Repeatedly.

I yank her arms down by the elbows. "Stop! You're beautiful just as you are."

She spins around, gives me that familiar glare. "You're my husband. What else are you going to say?"

I throw up my hands. She huffs, stomps a heel.

We make love that evening, but I can tell she's somewhere else.

In my dream, I'm still making love, but to Sharon. I wake up in a cold sweat, Kate snoring softly beside me.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

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"Hey, honey, I'm home."

I don't wait for a response. "Don't forget my job's summer office party Friday night."

I go upstairs, find her lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. By her side is an open pamphlet for FFAD. I'd heard of it: Face For A Day. Some new-fangled plastic surgery. I lazily flip through the brochure, fling it aside.

"Kate, what the hell? You don't need this!"

Without breaking her gaze, she whispers. "Yes, I do, and I'm not going to your damnable party unless you let me do this." She chokes back a sob, stabbing at her chest with a broken nail. "For me, Sean. For me."

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I'm pacing around FFAD's waiting room, still questioning why I agreed to this. Yes, the lead aesthetician had explained the process: the application of a patented programmable biomass based on the client's desires, chosen from millions of AI-generated facsimiles. All perfectly safe.

And temporary.

When Kate finally emerges like a butterfly from its cocoon, I admit I'm stunned. She looks like herself, only twenty years younger. Except, there is something else there, something from memory.

I shake it off because she's all smiles. And me? I'm speechless.

"Well, what do you think? Office party ready?"

She's happier than I've seen her in forever, so I allow myself to be sucked in.

The lead aesthetician joins us. "Looks like Kate's plenty happy, and if I'm not mistaken, you're pretty pleased yourself."

Kate's hugging me so hard, I can barely catch my breath.

"Remember, I beamed you our calendar, so you'll get notices as your expiration date approaches. I've already made your removal appointment for seven days out based on the version and timeframe you chose. You understand if you don't--"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

Kate's still ecstatic, so I only catch a part of the spiel, but I'm sure Kate has the gist, so I'm not worried. Happy wife, fortunate husband. And I'm all good paying for this kind of happiness.

At home, we don't even reach our bedroom. Making love has never been better. I find myself reluctant to touch her face, although the aesthetician assured us I won't be able to tell the difference.

Afterwards, we curl up against one another, something we haven't done in ages. In my dream, I imagine Kate's new face morphing into Sharon's, someone I loved too much. Someone I might still—

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At my employer's get together, Kate is the life of the party. For not knowing anyone, she is an instant hit with far too many of my co-workers. And she's not a drinker, so I'm thinking I need to cut her off.

I insert myself between her holding up the hors d'oeuvres table and my superior, who's getting a bit too frisky.

"Hey, sweetie!" Then: "Mason? How's it going?"

Mason flashes me his brightest-white smile I've witnessed far too many times when wooing clients of the female variety. He laughs nervously, then repeatedly slaps me on the back.

"Sean, man! Where have you been hiding her? She's—"

"Mine."

I wrap an arm around Kate's waist, corralling her into a corner. "Honey, don't you think you've had enough?"

Kate's eyes are practically bulging out of her head. She pushes me away.

"Of having fun, *Sean*?" her words biting, dismissive. "Remember that word? FUN? Oh, yeah, Sharon. *Those* were THE fun days, right?"

I'm so taken aback, I head to the bathroom. In the mirror, I watch myself squeeze my temples until my face reddens.

When I return, she's not there. I ask around. Someone mentions she might have caught an Uber.

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No Kate at home. Now I'm panicking.

An hour later, the doorbell rings. Two police officers tell me there's been an accident. I rush to the hospital, find her sedated, buried in tubes, her face and body a mess of contusions. Docs say they had to put her into a coma because of brain bleed.

The longer I watch her, I imagine her face morphing again, the bruises and scrapes healing themselves, becoming not Kate but Sharon. I turn away, shaken.

Time slows to a crawl. Hours become days.

I love Kate, but I can't escape Sharon; how we loved, the intensity, what she did to herself in the end. The blood. Because of me. Me.

"Fuck!"

I call the duty officer in charge, ask if they've recovered her phone. He said he'd get back to me.

*How many days has it been? What did that aesthetician say again?*

Frantic, I pull up FFAD's number, ask for the head aesthetician.

"Yes, we're expecting Kate within the hour. She's cutting it awfully close."

I explain the situation, but the aesthetician is adamant Kate must be physically there for removal.

There's a choking sound behind me. I turn to find Kate tearing at her face with chipped nails, eyes filled with terror.

She sees me. Tears well up.

"I'm so sorry, Sean. I just—"

Her arms drop to her side. I reach for her, but it's happening too fast. Her face hardens until it resembles a manikin's, or a stone sculpture.

Sharon's likeness. Kate chose Sharon.

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